



# International Non Governmental Organizations

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Pierre-Yves Saunier

Entry for *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History* (2009)

### **International Non governmental organizations**

‘Non-governmental organizations’ (NGOs) is a phrase that developed after 1945 in the ambit of the United Nations agencies, to name all what was not a mere element of the governmental system of member nations. This definition by default was shoved into the Charter during the UN San Francisco Conference by the civic groups representatives included as consultants into the official US delegation. According to article 71 of the UN charter, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was allowed to “make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations which are concerned with matters within its competence”. The term became part of the vocabulary used by the groups which wanted to develop a working relationship with the UN, or with UNESCO and the other inter governmental agencies that adopted article 71 terminology. Even groups that have thrived under a distinct legal tradition, such as the catholic groups which have adopted the status of private International Catholic Organisations as defined by articles 321-329 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law, are eager to call themselves non governmental organizations. There are several characteristics that make these organizations of importance for who tries to follow circulations and connections across national units: their program, their partnerships, their membership, their funding, their aspiration can extend beyond one country. International Non-governmental organizations (INGOs), that share one or several of these characteristics are the subject of this entry.

The previous generation of inter-governmental organizations, which had no specific mechanism to deal with such organizations, had called them ‘semi private’ ‘voluntary organization’ or ‘unofficial organizations’, though the phrase ‘non government organisation’ was used in the early 1920s by some labour activists connected to the International Labour Office and the former International Association for Labour Legislation. These groups have had other

terms to describe themselves, such as 'international associations', or from the late 1970s 'transnational associations', while their name flagged words such as 'union', 'conference' or 'council'. But they progressively adopted the UN denomination in their public presentation and working vocabulary, especially from the 1970s when it rang true with some groups's intention to distinguish themselves from governments and from inter governmental organizations. Nevertheless, the 1945 terminology quickly burst into a myriad of subcategories. Acronyms flourished to match the variety of organization forms, of membership, of purpose, such as GRINGOs (government regulated and initiated NGOs), GONGOs (government organised NGOs), BINGOs (business organized NGOs) or DONGOs (donor organized NGOs).

Social science researchers have contributed to this abundance, creating ad hoc typologies to study very specific questions and aspects. 'Transnational advocacy networks', 'global social movements', 'issue networks', 'transnational activism', 'principled issue movements', 'transnational coalitions' are some types which have been distinguished from 'international non governmental organizations'. Despite this flourishing cottage industry of labels, the recent explosion of scholarship focused on a very limited chronological range (from the last 1970s onwards), and on a limited number of 'blazing' fields and groups (development, human rights, environment, humanitarian relief) at the expense of NGOs in sports, business or disputable moral causes. The formidable expansion of this field of study, which has created its own forums with journals like Voluntas, has not yet explored the breadth of its variety. Monographs are still scarce, and studies are very much focused thematically and chronologically.

Together with Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, Sidney Tarrow is among the few social scientists to engage with historical transnational voluntary organizations from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, while Steve Charnowitz and Akira Iriye are the only ones who have recently attempted to grasp the development of voluntary groups from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, expanding previous overviews such as F.S Lyons' (1963) or L.C White's (1951). This entry will adopt such a catholic spirit for its chronological and typological extension.

Another salient common feature of the literature about voluntary organizations is the teleological or millenarist statement that the growing number of these different families attest of a quasi linear march towards world society since the beginning of the modern age. Some underscore the role of non governmental organizations as handmaidens of globalization, others stress their activity as a resistance to the latter, most view INGOs as 'good' in nature, and by and large few detract from the idea of a trend towards 'global civil society' that non governmental organizations would foster.

INGOs scholarship is still, by many aspects, very close from the home made glorious founding narratives which INGOs themselves have produced. One aspect of this immature character is that we researchers in the field are always elaborating from the data of the Union of International Associations (UIA), without acknowledging that this international association, a creation of Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine in 1907, has been an active protagonist of international voluntary organizing, that it developed its statistical perspective retrospectively for the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and that its categories are framed by its cooperation with the League of Nations, and later with the UN ECOSOC NGO committee.

There are a number of studies which have elaborated detailed tables and charts from UIA data. Though it still falls under some statistical fallacies because of the absence of a reflection on UIA data and typology, the study by Boli and Thomas is the most complete, and offers stimulating charts and graphs on the chronological, thematic and geographical evolution of non governmental organizations since 1875. For this entry, lest it fell into mere paraphrase of their explorations, it may be enough to stress the overall numerical expansion of INGOs, though un linear and uneven, the geographical focus of headquarters in a limited number of cities (Paris, Brussels, London, New York, Geneva), or the growing importance of non Western countries nationals in INGOs memberships and in the creation of new INGOs. This essay will, instead, assume an exploratory dimension and focus

on two aspects of the modern history of voluntary organizations, among so many which have attracted the attention of researchers.

### **Charts and faces**

INGOs have mostly been studied for their discourse, impact or programs but rarely for their operation mode. We know very few about the historical evolution of their financial situation, staff, organizational culture. While a comprehensive view is far from being possible here, the focus will be on organizational lines and personnel.

Membership into INGOs has and is still mediated by national lines in most cases. National sections or branches have been created both as a convenient way to manage membership and funding, and as an acknowledgement of the importance of the national scene in voluntary action, both as a scene and a target. This was especially true on a legal plane, and Belgium was the first nation to create a legal status for international associations (1919), before the Council of Europe presented its member states with a European Convention on the Recognition of the Legal Personality of International Non-Governmental Organisations (Convention No. 124, 1986). Some voluntary groups have tried to breach this organizational nationalism, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom imagined a 'world section' in 1924, with some leaders longing for it to be a 'psychological laboratory' to disconnect national affiliations. But the national branches plan was the basic scheme that was promoted by international organizers such as Paul Otlet and Henri Lafontaine, and even recent groups are developed along national lines. Accordingly, these are national sections that are the members of INGOs institutions, and the 'one member/one vote' principle that govern their life often turned out to be 'one national section/one vote', a fact that established the national dimension as a central aspect of international associations politics. Many of the conflicts that straddled their life, be it of professional, ideological or conceptual origin, were mediated through the national lines, or at best had to overlap with them.

Accordingly, political shenanigans often borrowed their garb from national

contests, of which the inner life of the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and International Olympics Committee (IOC) are perhaps the most famous, but not the fiercest. One of these struggles for national domination of INGOs took place in the 1930s, and opposed US civic groups, who wanted to seize international societies' imagination, to the Nazi government, which was out for power in these associations. The battle raged on several fronts: the International Criminal Police Commission, the International Union of Local Authorities, the International Institute of Administrative Sciences, or the International Union for the Scientific Investigation of Population Problems were ardently disputed. Both sides won, it can be said, but one victory was more durable than the other. This contest developed in the open field, but mostly in the dull areas of agenda control, membership fees, board meetings or nominations to executive and honorary positions. The governance mechanisms of voluntary groups became weapons for both sides.

Since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the inner life of voluntary groups, international or others, has extensively been moulded over the general framework of parliamentary regimes, with a distinction between a legislative branch (assembly) and an executive branch (council/committee) with a collegial leadership (board). There have been a range of variations on this scheme, though it remains to be known whether this matrix was equally successful among the groups which were bolstered from the Eastern Block during the Cold War, or among the voluntary groups which have emerged in non Western countries. Catholic organizations also have maintained some links with the church hierarchic organization that balanced the democratic factor, and so did Muslim relief groups which are financed by the Saudian monarchy of the Sudanese state. Within this wide frameworks, the informal political, professional or cultural networks that are crystallized in a given organization have given birth to different organization cultures. During the interwar years, for example, organizations with a large membership into continental European socialist parties and political personnel like the

International Union of Local Authorities followed the rule of majority to take their decisions, while the architects, civil servants and city planners of the International Garden Cities and Town Planning Federation relentlessly sought compromise and consensus.

Very often, the coming of age of our voluntary groups went along with progressive changes in organization. A classic pattern was the evolution from sporadic to regular meetings, which solidified informal networks of individuals with a similar interest or purpose, followed by the creation of a 'permanent committee' to organize these meetings, and later by the establishment of regulated governance system with elected officers. This was especially true in scientific groups which began to expand from the 1850s, like the Congress of Statistics, after initial gatherings during World Fairs. But some groups have also lived for years under the charismatic leadership of an energetic individual, such as Frances Willard at the World's Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WWCTU) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jean Marie Bressant at the United Towns Organization from the 1950s to the 1980s or Abdallah Suleyman al'Awad at the Islamic African Relief Agency (1981), and this established different but not peaceful rules for internal discussion and decision making.

The governance question often crystallized around the headquarters matter. Creating a headquarter was an act of faith in the cause defended by the organization (e.g the project of a 'Woman's Temple' for WWCTU), but also a strong organizational gesture designed to hold the group together and manifest its presence to the world. This was no accident that, in the 1920s, more and more groups created a headquarter in Geneva : it has been computed that 3 international associations were located in the Swiss city in 1919, and 60 in 1930. The IWLPF with its *Maison Internationale* in 1919 and the International Council of Nurses in October 1925 were among those who sought both the opportunities for international understanding opened by a location in neutral Switzerland, and the propinquity with the League of Nations or International Labor Office's officers and delegation. But the creation of a headquarter also signified the affirmation of a central power inside the

association, at the expense of regional or national sections (Amnesty International being a clear case of centralized decision and operation making). This made the headquarters formula a favourite device of international organizers who were motivated by a desire to promote internationalism in general. The location of such a secretariat was a matter of national or cultural prominence and an important element as to the inwards and outwards perception of the group, as witnessed by the split that took continental European housing reformers out of the International Federation of Garden Cities and Town and Country Planning in 1928, to create the International Housing Association with a secretariat in Francfort (Germany). This led to heated discussions, all the more than these groups were often living on a shoestring, with conferences and congresses being a major resource for funding.

The creation or the expansion of headquarters also included the question of the permanent staff, and connected with the uneasy relationship between volunteers and professionals. The process of change was not linear, but in early days, management tasks were often performed by energetic members themselves, possibly people with independent resources such as Christiane Reinmann at the International Council of Nurses. She was the society's secretary from 1925, and contributed to the group finances from her own chest in addition to her unpaid labour. Solutions were also found by employing staff who were part time or full time paid by some political group or governmental agency with which the voluntary group was associated, as in the Brussels based International Institute of Administrative Sciences in the 1920s-1930s that relied on Belgian civil servants from the Interior Department. But the workload increased with the growth of the associations, or with the need for field agents when they began to develop specific programs 'out there', or with the growing cooperation with funding agencies that required accountability. The professionalization process often began with the hiring of clerical and publication personnel, and was a potential breach in the social fabric of the voluntary groups. Julia Henderson, the secretary of the International Planned



Parenthood Federation from 1970, spent a lot of energy in talking with key volunteers so they accepted both professionalization and the growing importance of the London staff global headquarters paid staff over voluntary regional directors and committees. More recently, such a transition was especially challenging in humanitarian relief organisations that constructed their profile around individual dedication, like *Médecins Sans Frontières* or *Médecins du Monde*, where the number of logistics and administrative hands has grown at the expense of health volunteers while the organizations expanded the size and budget of their operations during the 1990s. A real labor market has appeared: it is now a familiar profile, that of the expatriated or local field worker who commutes between short term contracts for different NGOs in the same region or country, or that of the managing officer who switches from *Médecins Sans Frontières* to CARE. This is but the latest aspect of a long history where voluntary organizations interacted continuously with one another, through cooperation or competition mechanisms.

### **A field of international Non governmental organizations ?**

The world of ideals is not an ideal world, and voluntary societies have been competing for members, funds, recognition and ground in the very name of the cause they defended. In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, national and transatlantic abolitionist societies split over the question of integral or incremental abolition of slavery. More widely, the endorsement of programs, values and activities by the newest societies in a given field was often the result of conscious differentiation from older groups. The history of the women's organizations at the turn of the century thus looks like a chain reaction: the International Council of Women was created in 1888 following the conclusion that issue oriented groups (temperance, abolitionism, socialism, peace) were not giving their place to women and to women's problems. The International Woman Suffrage Alliance took shape in 1904 as the Council was deemed too shy about suffrage, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom was imagined by some women who wanted to take side

against the First World War while the Alliance leaders had decided to suspend activities and abide to national loyalties. Similarly, the foundation of *Médecins sans Frontières* in 1971 resulted from a disagreement with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) neutral attitude into the Biafra conflict. The whole 'sans frontierism' repertoire and values have, for a long time, explicitly been defined against ICRC practices. Competition also contributed to frame relationships between voluntary associations that did not belong to the same genealogy, especially among groups that share a field of action with different geographical, cultural, religious or ideological affiliations. They often end up in competing for non elastic resources, be it funding, members, recognition or even beneficiaries. Competition can be severe, as witnessed by attempts by some Muslim relief organizations to get exclusive access to Muslims beneficiaries in Africa or Asia terrains since the 1990s, a communitarism they justify by the attempts of some Christian NGOs to cure, care ...and convert. On a lighter note, there has been a lot of comments on the 'logo wars' that saw relief organisations competing to plant their flag or show their branded-apparel in front of TV cameras, either during the Yugoslavia or Rwanda 1990s events. The increasing number of NGOs who are now present on emergency relief terrains has certainly sharpened the elbows: the Save the Children Fund and the ICRC were alone in Ethiopia in 1935-1936, while there were 43 NGOs in Bangladesh in 1972, and 120 around the Great Lakes during the Rwanda civil war of 1994-1995. But competition was already at the order of the day during 19<sup>th</sup> century world fairs when scientific groups competed for conference opportunities, or during the 1930s where the scarcity of financial resources led to disputes on congress locations and the 'proper' affiliation of members among groups with similar audiences. Such rivalries surfaced publicly during the Cold War years, and there were continuous battles between the blocks to include or expel non governmental organizations from consultative status at ECOSOC, such as when the boycott of Russian representatives in July 1950 gave the Western side the opportunity to downgrade the International Organization of Journalists (based in

Czechoslovakia). Voluntary societies sometimes instrumentalized this conflict to get prominence over a neighbouring group.

But this sense of competition did not radically alter the common feeling that voluntary societies were some sort of global avant garde, an elite of 'people of good will' bonded by brotherhood or sisterhood ties. The fact that it was quite common to belong to several international voluntary societies, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century where professional or issue specialization was not so developed, facilitated both competition and cooperation. Competition itself suggested that coordination was a solution that would allow for peaceful coexistence. A range of solutions were imagined to manage the latter, from the geographical or intellectual division of labor to the creation of informal or formal mechanisms. Thus in the 1920s and 1930s, the International Union of Local Authorities and the International Institute of Administrative Sciences had agreed that the latter would leave municipal administration out of his agenda, and many other 'non governmental Yaltas' have taken place among INGOs. In the 1920s, the different women's societies held meetings to coordinate their conference schedule, and joint conferences were not rare even among feuding groups, especially in the 1930s where members could not afford attending two conferences in a row. Merger, the ultimate coordination device, was also a solution that was contemplated to solve out conflicts that were seen as financially and intellectually perilous. The International Council of Women and the International Woman Alliance contemplated it several times during the 1920s, but the Alliance refused for reasons of 'pace and temper', a diplomatic way to say the Council was deemed too conservative. More recently, the United Towns Organization and the International Union of Local Authorities have merged into a new organization, United Cities and Local Governments, after half a century of fight to monopolize the representation of municipal urban governments. It is no accident that this last merger was strongly supported by the United Nations and its specialized agencies, who wanted a single partner for possible partnerships.

Convergence among non governmental organizations owed a good deal to the gentle pressure of funding and partner agencies. This has been made obvious by evolutions in the relief field since a couple of decades, though some attempts had been made in this direction in the 1960s for development aid. National governments and intergovernmental organizations (such as the European ECHO or the UN High Commission for Refugees) have massively farmed out their emergency aid to INGOs, harnessing their funding with requests for accountability, norms and, sometimes, obedience. Sierra Leone (1998) and later Western Timor for the UN, Afghanistan operations for the US government, have been places where the integration of NGOs into governmental operations have been pushed quite far. The confusion during the Rwanda crisis and other 1990s critical moments was a crucial reason for non governmental relief groups to participate into this quest for norms and standards. Ad hoc programs have been created to foster this convergence and coordination with more or less directivity, such as Parinac for the UN High Commission for Refugees, InterAction for U.S.-based international development and humanitarian nongovernmental organizations, or the Sphere Project (1997), which documents minimum standards in disaster response accepted by part of the NGO community and by concerned United Nations agencies. The production of the now famous *Sphere handbook* (2000, revised in 2004) has nevertheless been contested, and other NGOs, mostly but not exclusively French, have launched their own 'quality program' in 1999. Private givers have also been keen to get what they deemed increased efficiency from the voluntary groups which received their funding, and the Spelman Fund of New York (a by product of the Rockefeller Foundation) was the crucial engineer of the creation of a joint secretariat and common information services for several international associations in Brussels in 1938, despite the fact that the project's growth was interrupted by World War 2.

But there is more into the history of coordination and convergence than the weight of external pressure in recent times. Cross observation among

voluntary groups was part of the original culture of these groups, as suggested by the reproduction of charters and status among different families of organizations (e.g how the International Council of Nurses got its name, its personnel and its first constitution from the International Council of Women). The establishment of coalitions and councils of non governmental organizations has extensive precedents. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Belgian international organizers Otlet and Lafontaine, with their Union des Associations Internationales, wanted to coordinate the action and programs of international associations they created or gathered. International catholic organizations held their first Conference of International Catholic Organizations in 1927, well before the Holy See gave them recognition in 1953. Making international associations contributions to the League of Nations different committees more effective was the reason for the creation of several issue coalitions, especially between women's or welfare organizations, while a 'Fédération des Institutions Internationales semi officielles et privées établies à Genève' was created in Geneva in 1929 to lobby for tax exemptions and access to League of Nations operations. The United Nations and its specialized agencies also incited INGOs to get together, and the 1948 creation of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CONGO) has been an important step to associate NGOs to the UN committees and working groups. Many more regional, specialized, religious or affinity federations have been established in the last decades: International Council of Voluntary Agencies (1962), International Cooperation for Development and Solidarity (CIDSE, 1967), Islamic Coordination Council (*maglis al-tansiq al-islami*, 1986), International Islamic Council for Da'wa and Relief, Caritas Internationalis, Forum for African Voluntary and Development Organizations.... Together with the narrative of competition, this now long history of federations, coalitions and organization among voluntary agencies underscores a bottom line: these groups are part of a field where they take inspiration and positions from one another, and this

field is in constant tension with the international system and the national dimension to gain some degree of autonomy.

## **Conclusion**

The historical study of international non governmental organizations, as foreseen by Ian Tyrrell in a 1991 *American Historical Review* article, is a rich seam for historians who want to adopt a transnational perspective. Existing scholarship has brought food for thought in three of the directions that these may want to follow. During the last two centuries, from informal networks to legal forms, these groups have been making and unmaking the threads of interdependence and interaction between polities and societies across borders, and acted as globalizers or regionalizers even when they wanted to fight globalization or regionalization as recently illustrated by the anti globalization movement. They also have been crucial in the construction of national societies and polities, by showcasing differences and similarities, and by fostering conversations which shaped social, professional, cultural or political aspects of national life. Also, they are historical objects of their own, which have invented forms of action, of governance, of dedication, in their attempt to do with national differences and pressures and their frequent –but not ominous- aspiration to some universal nature.

But there is still a long way to go, and we need to go beyond the historical narrative of moral goodness and linear progress and expansion that are obvious hurdles to our understanding. Historical depth is one of the solutions to these flaws of ‘third sector’ scholarship. It makes you realize that ‘new domains’ of INGOs activity have been framed by generations of activism, organizational work and campaigns. The range of INGOs activities has expanded and shrunk unevenly, and there is something to be gained to consider the different nexus of causes which have impulsed new dynamics in the space of INGOs: abolitionism/temperance/social reform/feminism from the

first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where a large part of the current repertoire of INGOs has been created (the boycott, the petition, the conference...); human rights and development have also been a powerhouse of innovation from the 1950s; environment groups of the 1960s with their aggressive presence into the media; fields like science from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the invention of the congress and its specific rules, or relief from the 1910s, and the aspiration to define a human solidarity in front of fear, disease and catastrophes, all have worked partly as vortexes which aspired and inspired changes into other domains and groups. The history of individual INGOs, of their interrelations, of their ties with political parties, religious institutions, national governments, inter governmental organizations, firms or philanthropic foundations, has to be written taking into account these concatenating configurations.

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**Cross references:** relief, Islamic relief worldwide, Medecins sans frontières, red cross and red crescent movement, human rights, amnesty international, environmentalism, Greenpeace, social sciences, humanities, life and natural sciences, mathematics, nursing, world fairs, anti racism, animal rights, human rights, children's rights, save the children international alliance, Paul Otlet, International Union of Local authorities,

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